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This 16-century Rabbi Rocks

Dancer draws on his black, Native American, Jewish heritage

By Jules Becker

Adam McKinney's family tree includes blacks, Native Americans and possibly a 16th-century Polish rabbi. McKinney, a former Alvin Ailey dancer, drew from his varied background to create "HaMapah," a multimedia work that will be performed next month at Wellesley College.

"HaMapah" – Hebrew for "the map" – takes its name from a work by Rabbi Moshe Isserles, believed to an ancestor of McKinney.



In a scene from "HaMapah," Adam McKinney dances against a background photo of his ancestors

Isserles, also known as the Rama, wrote the piece as a commentary on the Shulkhan Aruch, the halachic (Jewish legal) code of Sephardic Rabbi Joseph Caro.

McKinney will perform "HaMapah" under the direction of Daniel Banks, with whom he cofounded DNAWORKS four years ago in New York. Now based in Santa Fe, the organization uses the arts to grapple with identity, culture, class and heritage.

McKinney's dance movements are accompanied by music and visual effects, including a large photo of his Eastern European ancestors. One moved to Jerusalem, others to England, and McKinney's great grandfather to Chicago. There he and his brother went into the haberdashery business, later moving to Montana.

Skipping down the generations, McKinney's mother met his father at the University of Wisconsin. They moved to Milwaukee, where they were active in the local Jewish community and sent their son to Orthodox day school. They weren't particular observant, though. "Sometimes my family kept kosher, and sometimes they did not," McKinney said. "One thing that I love about Judaism is that it's flexible."

Another visual in the dance is a blown-up signature of Rabbi Moshe. Other photos are of his family on both sides.

McKinney has danced with: Bejart Ballet Lausanne and Alvin Ailey. "The dance styles are ballet, American modern dance, interpretive dance and cultural dance," he said.

McKinney's black and Native American heritage play roles as well. "I used black banjo music and a poem of my [black] grandmother Beatrice Dailey," who wrote under the pseudonym B. Trace, he said. Native American symbols in the work include animals and birds, notably the eagle. Eagle Dancer is McKinney's Native American name.

The 30-minute work is followed by an hour of audience discussion, which can be quite powerful in itself. McKinney and Banks have also led programming and created work with companies in

Israel, Palestine, at a refugee camp in Ghana, and townships in South Africa.

“We ask audience members to help us create a new language for thinking about identity and discussing identity,” Banks said. “It really fires people’s imaginations.”

“Through my story, people reconnect with their own stories,” said McKinney, who recalled that the performance prompted one audience member to call her 97- year-old cousin.

For Banks, the Wellesley show represents something of a homecoming. His mother, Naomi Banks of Chestnut Hill, is an alumna of Wellesley College. She was active in Wellesley Hillel, which is co-sponsoring the performance with the Ryna Greenbaum JCC Performing Arts Series.

Raised in Brookline, Banks attended Temple Sinai, taught music at Ohabei Shalom and at Temple Emeth, as well.

In advance of their Wellesley performance, Banks and McKinney will lead a multi-generational workshop in performance and self-expression Feb. 9 at the Leventhal-Sidman JCC in Newton. The free workshop will explore personal heritage through text and movement. As with the performance itself, the workshop is co-sponsored by the JCC and Wellesley Hillel.

To register for the workshop, call 617-558-6483.

“HaMapah,” at Wellesley College’s Jewett Arts Center. Feb. 12. Call 617-965-5226 or visit www.jccgb.org. Multi-generational workshop at Leventhal-Sidman JCC, Newton, Feb. 9. Call 617- 558-6483.



DNAWORKS Co-Directors
Adam McKinney and Daniel Banks, Ph.D.